



News Release

Southwest Region P.O. Box 1306 Albuquerque, NM 87103

For Release: June 6, 2002

Contacts: Elizabeth Slown, 505/248-6911
Victoria Fox (505) 248-6455

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE PROPOSES CRITICAL HABITAT FOR RIO GRANDE SILVERY MINNOW

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service today released a proposal to designate the middle reach of the Rio Grande in New Mexico as critical habitat for the endangered Rio Grande silvery minnow. Public comments will be accepted through September 4, 2002.

Two hearings are scheduled from 6 to 9 p.m. One will be held on June 25 in Socorro at the New Mexico Institute for Mining and Technology, Macey Center, 801 Leroy Place and the second in Albuquerque on June 26 at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center, 2401 12th Street NW. Both hearings begin with an information session followed by testimonies.

Under the Endangered Species Act, critical habitat defines specific geographic areas that are essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and may require special management considerations. A designation does not set up a preserve or refuge and applies to situations where Federal funding or a Federal permit is involved. It has no regulatory impact on private landowners taking actions on their land unless Federal funding or permits are involved.

The proposed area encompasses the river reach immediately downstream of Cochiti Reservoir to the Elephant Butte Reservoir Dam as well as the tributary Jemez River from Jemez Canyon Reservoir to its confluence with the Rio Grande. A 300-foot riparian zone adjacent to each side of the river except in areas bounded by existing levees is included.

The Rio Grande silvery minnow has good recovery potential, said H. Dale Hall, Director of the Service's Southwest Region. We will continue to work closely with area landowners and water users as we refine this proposal and develop strategies to meet the needs of the minnow and the surrounding communities.

This proposal replaces an earlier critical habitat designation. A Federal court set aside that rule in 2000

requiring that an Environmental Impact Statement and Economic Analysis be prepared. Draft documents have been prepared and are also available for review during the comment period.

Federal agencies whose actions influence water in the middle Rio Grande already consult with the Service to reduce the impacts their projects have on the Rio Grande silvery minnow. These requirements would not change with the designation of critical habitat.

The target flows in the Rio Grande that we have recommended in the past will not differ, said Hall. We anticipate that this proposal will have little impact on water users.

By definition, critical habitat does not include developed areas that do not provide elements necessary for the survival of the species, even though they may lie within designated critical habitat boundaries. For example, paved roads, dikes, levees, diversion structures, railroad tracks, railroad trestles, water diversion canals outside of natural stream channels, cultivated agricultural land, and residential, commercial, and industrial developments would be excluded.

In addition to the proposed rule, the Service has also prepared a draft economic analysis and a draft environmental impact statement. The public can review and comment on all three documents. The rule will be modified based on input and finalized in the fall, 2002. To obtain paper copies or a compact disc, please call (505) 346-2525 or visit the field office at 2105 Osuna NE, Albuquerque, New Mexico, 87113, during business hours, or access the internet at <http://ifw2es.fws.gov/Library/>. Mail comments to the Field Supervisor, U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service at the above address or send by facsimile to (505) 346-2542.

The Rio Grande silvery minnow is a native fish first listed as endangered in 1994. The minnow was once one of the most abundant and widespread of the desert fishes in the Rio Grande Basin. It ranged from Espanola, New Mexico, to the Gulf of Mexico. It was found in the Pecos River from Santa Rosa, New Mexico, downstream to its confluence with the Rio Grande. The silvery minnow has completely died out in the Pecos River and in the upper and lower Rio Grande.

The silvery minnow's decline has been attributed to decreased and interrupted stream flows caused by impoundments, water diversion for agriculture and stream channelization. The species may also be affected by interactions with non-native fish and decreasing water quality in its native streams.

The small fish's reproductive strategy is to spawn early and incubate quickly. The minnow's semi-buoyant eggs seek the deepest, hence swiftest waters, and can drift as far as 200 miles downstream. In about three to five days the fry are developed enough to begin swimming upstream. There they search out shallow backwaters where they feed and grow to about 2 inches during the summer. Most minnows only live one year so a successful spawn is crucial. With its biological clock timed for May, the minnow is one step ahead of its predators.

The Service's recovery plan for the silvery minnow recommends the fish be firmly established in three distinct river reaches before beginning the process to remove it from the list of threatened and endangered species.

Although other river reaches have suitable habitat for the silvery minnow they are not included. The

Service believes recovery goals can be achieved using other authorities under the Endangered Species Act.

The Act offers several paths to recovering species. Critical habit designation is one conservation strategy. Another approach is to reintroduce threatened or endangered species back into areas that were previously occupied. By using experimental stockings, the Service would have the discretion to manage minnows in such a way that current and future land or water uses should not be restricted.

Our preference is to use both critical habitat and experimental populations to recover the minnow, said Hall. We will end up with less regulation and a better chance for success.

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting, and enhancing fish and wildlife and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 93-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System comprising more than 500 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands, and other special management areas. It also operates 66 national fish hatcheries and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces Federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state wildlife agencies.